

# **the BOER WAR**

**by WIEBE K. BOER  
HISTORY 305  
28 APRIL 1995**

## THE BOER WAR

As the 1800's moved into the 1900's, two powerful nations were in the midst of two separate imperial wars. The one war was the Spanish-American War from which the United States emerged completely victorious and through which the United States finally realized they had in fact become a world power. The other war is known by many names. It is known to some as the Second War for Independence, and to others as the Three Years' War or the Anglo-Boer War. However, the most common term for it is the profoundly beautiful and elegant name the BOER War. This war, the last of the great imperial wars, was won by Britain, but at a terrible cost to all. For the British the bill was 200 million Pounds Sterling and the death of 22,000 British soldiers. (Pakenham 607) The Afrikaners lost relatively more in lives -- 7,000 burgher fighters, and thousands of innocent citizens who died in the concentration camps -- as well as the loss of much property and the devastation of farm land. (Pakenham 607) The biggest losers in the war were the black Africans of Southern Africa, but no one cared enough then to keep records of their losses. The war was a wake up call to Great Britain which taught them that they were not quite as great as they thought. In the nineteenth century, Great Britain was still the world's leading power, but as these two wars symbolized, the twentieth century would belong to her prodigal child the United States. So, then, how did Transvaal and the Orange Free State, two of the world's smallest nations, together manage to humble and keep at bay the world's greatest power for three long years? Furthermore, what did the Boer War really accomplish, and what was its legacy? These are

the questions I set out to answer by reading the Three Years' War written by General Christiaan Rudolph De Wet, and The Boer War by Thomas Pakenham. Three Years' War is a primary source written by one of the Boer's toughest generals immediately after the war, and The Boer War is an extremely long book written by a premier South African and African colonial historian from Great Britain in 1979.

Christiaan De Wet begins his book with a preface apologizing that "I am no book writer." (De West vii) He goes on to prove this with flying colours in the book, although the poor writing could also be blamed on the translator, seeing as De Wet knew no English whatsoever. The reason he wrote the book was to "give to the world a true story which, although it does not contain the whole of the truth, as regards the wondrous war, yet contains nothing but the truth." (De Wet vii) The Boer War officially began on the 11th of October 1899 after the ultimatum to Britain ended. De Wet does not mention what the ultimatum involved, so for this I will jump prematurely to Pakenham's book. The ultimatum involved four points. The first was that Britain had to "agree to arbitration on all points of mutual difference." (Pakenham 104) The next three points specifically involved the military and demanded that all British troops on the borders of the republics should withdraw, that all British reinforcements just arriving should leave South Africa, and that all British soldiers en route should turn back. Britain did not comply, and by the time the ultimatum expired, De Wet was already camped at Harrismith as vice-commandant of a Boer commando waiting to invade the British colony of Natal. When the war began, he was part of the quick Boer push into Natal which won several early battles and laid siege to the city of Ladysmith. In December, he was made a Vechtgeneral (fighting general) and posted to Magersfontein in his native Orange Free State. While there, his burghers (Boer militia soldiers) were plagued by



shelling attacks from the British, but they suffered very few casualties. He did not attribute this bit of luck to British incompetence, but rather to God. He writes: "I ascribe our comparative impunity to a Higher Power, which averted misfortune from us." (De Wet 25) He makes claims like this throughout the book, attributing his and his people's successes against all odds to the power and goodness of God. After one particularly lucky escape, he said "Here I had the most wonderful of all the escapes that God allowed me in the whole course of the war" (De Wet 152), and later he states: "it was not God's will that I should fall into their hands." (De Wet 214) Besides being completely confident that his cause and God's cause were the same, he was also extremely confident in his own abilities. When General Cronje surrendered and provided the Boers with their first major defeat in the war, De Wet says, "Had he but taken my advice, and attempted a night attack, he might have avoided capture altogether." (De Wet 43) He writes on and on about all his successes and the mishaps of other Boer generals. However, when he is beaten he makes quick excuses like "We had too few men." (De Wet 116) When Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State, fell on March 13, 1900 without a fight, the Boers' moral was getting very low. Several Boer generals and President Kruger of the Transvaal and President Steyn of the Orange Free State had a war council on March 20 in which they vowed to continue fighting with renewed vigour. After this war council, the Boer war strategy changed. They moved towards smaller and more mobile fighting forces that could hit and run with great success and devastation to the enemy. Thus, even though the British kept thinking they had the Boers beaten, there was always another surprise waiting for them.

By this time in the war, the Boers were up against formidable odds. Many of their

own people were deserting, their supplies were running low, and worst of all, General Prinsloo surrendered a large portion of the Afrikaner army without needing to. The fact that the Boers had lasted even a year surprised the rest of the world. De Wet paints a great picture of what they were up against in the following passage:

"England's great power pitted against two Republics, which, in comparison with European countries, were nearly uninhabited! This mighty Empire employed against us, besides their own English, Scotch and Irish soldiers, volunteers from the Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and South African colonies; hired against us both black and white nations, and, what is worst of all, the national scouts from our own nation sent out against us. Think, further, that all harbours were closed to us, and that there were therefore no imports. Can you not see that the whole course of events was a miracle from beginning to end? A miracle of God in the eyes of every one who looks at it with an unbiased mind, but even more apparent to those who had personal experience of it." (De Wet 224)

With their new strategy, they changed the way the war was fought and drove the British crazy. The British soon began to realize that chasing the Boer commandos around the veld was futile, and thus embarked on a strategy of all out war. They began burning down houses and farms of the burghers and placing their wives and children in internment camps. General De Wet harshly criticizes the cruel tactics of the British against the innocent and writes, "that such direct and indirect murder should have been committed against defenseless women and children is a thing which I should have staked my head could never have happened in a war waged by the civilized English nation." (De Wet 193) What De Wet did not realize was that this was to be the future of war. The concentration camp, invented by the British, became one of the most cruel factors of modern warfare resulting in such terrible tragedies as Auschwitz. By September of 1901, there were 74,000 women and children in the camps. (De Wet 257) The burghers continued fighting and inflicting great losses to the British, and so the British set up a system of blockhouses across the land. These became a big joke as they



simply provided the burghers with easy access to supplies. By early 1902, with the pressure of their families dying in camps, their property being destroyed, their farms being ruined, and the burghers' shortage of food and other supplies, the generals realized they had to end the war. It was one of the toughest things they ever had to do, but "To continue the struggle meant extermination." (De Wet 321) On the 31st of May 1902, the Boer leaders signed the Treaty of Peace; agreeing to do so by a vote of 56 to 4. De Wet points out the irony in the fact that his people had to vote to lose their independence. In spite of General De Wet's refusal to give in for so long, he ends the book advising his people to be loyal to the new government since loyalty pays off in the end. Even stranger is the fact that his book is dedicated to "MY FELLOW SUBJECTS of THE BRITISH EMPIRE." Keep this in mind as you read Pakenham's description of the war and De Wet's role in it.

Christiaan De Wet was an eye witness to the war, and a major player in it. His reason for writing the book was not just the innocent reason I quoted him as giving earlier. He wrote the book to make anyone who reads it sympathetic with the Boer cause, even though the war is over. His writing makes the British army out to be a bunch of incompetent and uncivilized butchers. He makes his cause out to be ordained by God, and as having the most noble of intentions -- keeping the liberty of his people and their two small democratic republics. Of course he never mentions the plight of the blacks and Indians, or the non-Afrikaner immigrants to the Rand gold mines. From reading his book, the war was based on one thing only -- that the tyrannical British Empire was breaking all their treaties and agreements of the past to crush the liberty of the Afrikaners and subject them to the level of a 'kaffir.'

Thomas Pakenham's book The Boer War is much better written than Three Years' War, but it is also much more full of detail and trivial military procedures. I love the study of history, but not the trivial and detailed history of what every British officer did and said from 1899 to 1902. Regardless, Pakenham makes trivia come alive better than most, and so the book was not as tedious as it could have been. Thomas Pakenham is a popular historian, and his aim is to present the Boer War in such a way that it reads like an adventure novel (albeit, a very detailed one). His approach is very level and unbiased, and his sources included all sorts of materials from both sides (including De Wet's book). He even went so far as to learn Dutch and Afrikaans so he could read the Boer sources in their original form, thus removing the possible bias of a British translator.

As Pakenham is British, he looks more to the British side of things than the Boer General De Wet did. He also starts earlier. Pakenham believes the first battle of the Boer War was really the Jameson Raid of 1895. During this raid, Cecil Rhodes and others attempted a military takeover of the Transvaal so that they could have complete control over the Rand gold fields. They were unsuccessful, but the British kept a watchful eye on the gold mines. When the British settlers in the Transvaal, the Uitlanders, finally outnumbered the Boers, but were still not allowed to vote, the British began to get angry. Much negotiation went on between Lord Milner of the British Cape Colony and President Kruger of the Transvaal, but to no avail. War was still avoidable, especially since it did not seem that the Orange Free State would join in the fight. However, when Christiaan De Wet threatened to revolt against President Steyn (who De Wet claimed he was really close to), the Orange Free State promised they would aid their sister republic. Thus, the war began on October 11,



1899.

There is no need to go into too many tedious details of the war, and thus I will use Pakenham's book to get a more British (although neutral) view. According to Pakenham, the entire war was taken as a joke in Britain. Everyone went into the war in a joyful mood, certain that it would be over by Christmas of the same year. When the Boers continually thrashed them in the opening months, the British got scared and rallied together in the midst of the international humiliation. There was even a time when the British military thought the Boers had a chance of defeating them and chasing them out of South Africa all together. The British were led by several able generals who just could not get it right -- Lord Redvers Buller, Lord Roberts, and Lord Kitchener to name the most important. At first, the British were getting decked because their "nineteenth century army...were all learning how to fight a twentieth century war." (Pakenham 322) Once they got the hang of it and started beating back the Boers, the Boers changed their strategy. I was beginning to think that General De Wet's glowing picture of his personal military genius was all 'wet' when after more than 300 pages Pakenham had only mentioned him once. The reason for this is that De Wet did not become prominent until the Boer tactical change, which was based on his military strategy. De Wet developed the new strategy and also became its most successful proponent. Thus, he and President Steyn became the "leaders and symbols of the Boer resistance." (Pakenham 463) It is strange that it was the Free Staters who motivated the Transvaalers to keep fighting even though it was really the Transvaalers' war. Pakenham writes about the amazing successes of the Boers' daring guerilla warfare, something that would make De Wet very angry. In his book he defends the burghers, saying they were not guerrillas since they were



fighting for the legitimate governments of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Thus, if anyone could be called rebels or guerrillas, it was the British.

Pakenham provides a very good description of the workings of the mighty British army as they struggled to fight a "civilized war in an uncivilized country." (Pakenham 398) He also gives a good feeling of the incredible devotion (most of) the Boers had to their land, to their leaders, and to God. What else would have motivated Boer generals like Louis Botha, Koos De la Rey, Jan Smuts (whom De Wet only mentions once), and Christiaan De Wet to fight so long against such odds? Even after losing Ladysmith, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, Mafeking, Johannesburg, and Pretoria, the Boers kept fighting on. It was only the all out war techniques the British employed of burning Boer farms and imprisoning their families that brought the fearless burghers to their knees. Pakenham also describes the horrors of the concentration camps, as well as the campaign of Emily Hobhouse to make these known to the people of Britain. These things, together with the British arming of thousands of black soldiers and their employing of Afrikaner scouts, forced the Boer leaders to go to Pretoria in April 1902 to discuss the peace settlement which was signed even by the "bitter enders" on May 31.

What, then, was the legacy of these three years of conflict? During the war, the two major advocates of British imperialism -- Queen Victoria and Cecil Rhodes -- both passed away, and with them, the age of imperialism. By the end of the Boer War, all of Africa except for Liberia and Ethiopia had been divided among the powers of Europe (although not yet conquered), and thus the scramble for Africa (the topic of another long Pakenham book) was complete. The Boer War was the last European war in which cavalry were used to any

effect, and the last British war fought completely on the ground. With the Boer War came an entirely new approach to fighting that brought fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of warfare. The total warfare invented by the British in which every Boer -- civilian or soldier - - was considered an enemy brought with it the horrors of the concentration camp. The British learned through the Boer War "that the smokeless, long-range, high velocity, small-bore magazine bullet from rifle or machine-gun -- plus the trench -- had decisively tilted the balance against attack and in favour of defence." (Pakenham 610) The rest of the world did not learn this until such terrible World War I stalemates as those of Flanders and the Dardanelles.

In his book, Pakenham mentions three men who were to become very important in the history of different parts of the world. First of all, there was young Winston Churchill, a soldier-journalist who got himself into his fair share of trouble during the war. Secondly, there was Jan Smuts, a young Boer general from the Cape Colony who later unified the Boers and the British and became one of South Africa's greatest prime ministers. During World War II, Smuts was an important part of Churchill's wartime cabinet. This was another wonderful irony since during the Boer War they were adversaries, and at the time, Churchill was the lesser known of the two. The third man who emerged in the Boer War was to become one of the greatest moral leaders of the twentieth century. He led one of the first third world independence movements and was one of the founders of the world's largest democracy. That man was Mohandas K. Ghandi, who in the Boer War headed the Indian crews that picked up the British dead and wounded after battles.

Several of the Boer generals, including Louis Botha, Judge Hertzog, and Jan Smuts



were set on reconciliation with the British and each served as prime minister of the Union of South Africa after its founding in 1910. However, there were thousands of other Boers who did not forget the war and never forgave the British or their own leaders who had appeared to sell out. According to Pakenham, Christian De Wet went against his own advice and led a rebellion against the Union government in 1914 which was crushed by his own Boer War comrades Botha and Smuts. De Wet died as a nobody in 1922, but his spirit of rebellion lived on. Over the next few decades, the Afrikaners, through the Broederbond (which was founded by an Afrikaner who as a boy almost died in one of the concentration camps) began to regain control, and in 1948, their party came to power. In 1961, they took South Africa out of the British Commonwealth, and thus they finally had what they had fought so hard to preserve in the Boer War -- their own republic(s).

The seeds of Apartheid were also sown during the Boer War. The racism towards the black peoples of South Africa can be seen from the fact that De Wet never mentions any by name, but only by the derogatory term 'kaffir.' Even though thousands of blacks were labourers for the army and the 10,000 armed by Lord Kitchener played a big part in the British victory, no records were kept of their dead and wounded. Nobody thought them worthy of it. The Boers looked at the blacks "as dogs and the killing of them as hardly a crime." (Pakenham 608) The British were not innocent of racism either. When the British captured Johannesburg, the black Rand mine workers thought things would get better, but they did not. The British did not change the discriminatory laws of the Afrikaners. In fact, things got worse since the British applied these laws "with an efficiency that the Boers had never been able to muster." (Pakenham 454) The Boers who later took power under the

National Party in 1948 remembered that the British had not done much for the blacks in the Boer War. They realized that their Apartheid system would get little protest from the British who shared the country which they had both stolen from the numerous indigenous black nations of the region, although the Boers did so at a much earlier time. Furthermore, the war made the reconciliation between the two white groups -- one an African tribe, the other a group of immigrants -- more difficult than before. The struggle between them was taken out on the blacks and the Indians, and is even now not completely resolved even though the struggle between the races is officially over.

While reading the two books, I found myself sympathizing completely with the Boers, the white tribe of Africa. This is not only because we have a common name, but because they had such courageous and unbeatable spirits. They went up against the world's greatest power and almost beat them. They were driven by a fear of God, love for their land, and a fierce desire for independence that appeared almost invincible. It is these same combination of things that have made the Afrikaners a pariah people in the world community, a reputation that will take many years of majority rule to erase. It is this sense of destiny from God and independent spirit that created the Apartheid system. I think the reason it is so easy to back the Boers then is that during the war they were the underdogs. Furthermore, the history of the black nations of the time is all written with a racist slant, and thus we do not know what was really going on behind it all. If it was possible to find a true, complete picture of the war, and how it involved the black nations (and the Indians), I doubt I would still find myself supporting the Boer side in the war. As a people they were as racist and self centered then as they are today. I quickly learned from my travels in South Africa over this past Christmas



that they are extremely hospitable people, but only if you are white and do not question any of their beliefs about race, politics, theology, science, and so on. In fact, I am angry with myself for feeling solidarity with them in their struggle while reading the book. They are the ones who have given my surname a bad connotation. In reality, there is no reason for me to be proud of my last name because it is the name of one of the world's most ethnocentric tribes. I digress. In the end, the Boer War accomplished very little. British investors already dominated the Rand mines before the war, and the British take over made little difference. Within a decade after the war, the Union of South Africa was formed by uniting Natal, Cape Colony, Transvaal, and the Orange Free State. Other than Nelson Mandela, all the prime ministers and state presidents of South Africa have been Afrikaners. Thus, the British won the war only to create a bigger country for the Boers to rule! The Boer War is an important part of the history of European imperialism in Africa and of the Afrikaner people. These two topics interest me immensely, and thus reading the two books and writing this paper have been a very instructive and interesting operation. I hope that you the reader have also benefitted by learning a little more about this small and relatively unknown and unstudied piece of history.

## SOURCES

De Wet, General Christiaan Rudolph. Three Years' War. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.

Pakenham, Thomas. The Boer War. New York: Random House, 1979.